

- 478.6
C 553s
no. 10

The Blessings of our Knowledge
and of our Ignorance in Regard
to a Future State

BY

JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE

Sermons of James Freeman Clarke

THE BLESSINGS OF OUR KNOWLEDGE
AND OF OUR IGNORANCE IN
REGARD TO A FUTURE
STATE

BOSTON
GEO. H. ELLIS CO., 272 CONGRESS STREET
1908

THE BLESSINGS OF OUR KNOWLEDGE AND OF OUR IGNORANCE IN REGARD TO A FUTURE STATE.

"Beloved, now are we children of God, and it is not yet made manifest what we shall be; but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him even as he is."—1 JOHN iii. 2.

"Now we see in a mirror darkly; but then, face to face. Now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I have been known." 1 COR. xiii. 12.

EASTER Sunday is the most universal festival in the Christian Church, coming down from the earliest times, expressing more fully than any other the common faith of Christians in the truth of the gospel; the power of Christ to overcome all evil; the triumph of life over death; the certainty of our own immortality and that of all whom we love. "If Christ hath not been raised, then is our preaching vain; your faith also is vain." Not that all belief in immortality depends on the resurrection of Jesus: there are many other legitimate proofs of a hereafter. Nor does the truth of Christ's teaching, the justice of his morality, or the goodness of his life, depend upon this one fact of his history. Yet the faith of the Christian Church rests on this fact, as the bridge which crosses a foaming torrent rests on the stone abutments. We do not dig up the ground to look at the foundations on which our house stands; but there they are, a solid hidden support of the whole structure. So the vast building which we call "the Christian Church" would, so far as we can tell, never have existed if this fact had not occurred, which has come down

to us to-day through the long tradition of eighteen centuries. If this be so, it is well to keep Easter with joy, and call it "the queen of festivals."

Consider, then, the facts. That Jesus was put to death we know, not only by the testimony of Tacitus and other heathen writers, but by that of the whole early Church that its Master suffered the punishment considered then the most shameful of all,—that of the cross. Crucifixion was the death of slaves, most degrading, most ignominious, in the popular esteem. No body of men in those days would have admitted that the Master they served had been crucified unless the fact was certain and well known. Had there been the least doubt on the subject, that doubt would have appeared in the early Christian writings, in answer to those who taunted Christians with serving a crucified leader. Gibbon says that the cross was an object of horror to the Roman citizen, and with it were closely connected the ideas of guilt, pain, and ignominy. He quotes Cicero, who says, "Let the cross be not only absent from the body of Roman citizens, but its very name be absent from their eyes, their ears, their thoughts." Even Celsus, the earliest and bitterest opposer of Christianity, did not think of denying the reality of Christ's death, but only that of his resurrection.

Unless Jesus had been crucified, how are we to explain the entire change of feeling in regard to the cross which took place within three centuries? In the time of Cicero it was an object of horror and contempt; it was not even to enter the thoughts of any good man. In the time of Constantine it was placed on the standards of the Roman army, and afterward on the sceptres and crowns of kings. Churches were built in the form of a cross; their spires were crowned with it; and about the year 400 a festival was appointed to celebrate the "exaltation of the cross."

In the form of a crucifix the cross became an object of adoration, and one of our Unitarian poets sings,—

“In the cross of Christ I glory.”

All this vast change of feeling in regard to the cross is explained by the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus; but, if he was not thus put to death or did not rise, this glorification of the cross is inexplicable.

Jesus, then, was put to death. His enemies, as they believed, had conquered. His few disciples had forsaken him, and fled. Their faith and hope were buried in his grave. But it is certain that after a little while their courage returned, and became greater than ever before. Their ignorance of the gospel of their Master was changed into knowledge. Their characters were elevated. They became capable of the utmost devotion, self-denial, labor, in behalf of this defeated Master and this conquered cause. They rose to such heights of spiritual insight that the letters of Peter, of James, and of John, are full of light, warning, and consolation for the noblest souls of all times. How did this change come about? How was the Christian Church founded? What power made the crucified Christ the Master of the Roman Empire? The disciples themselves tell us that it was because they saw him risen up, ascended into glory. That is *their* explanation: the explanation of those who reject the resurrection is that they made a mistake, were misled by an excited fancy, and that the whole vast growth of the Christian Church had no motive power behind it other than an imagination and a delusion.

Now, if the future life is an impossibility, if it is a violation of universal law that those who die shall live in a higher state, then we must admit any explanation or no

explanation rather than believe in the resurrection. "If the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised." If it is impossible for the dead to rise, then Christ cannot have risen, and we must accept the best explanation we can find of the origin of the Christian Church.

But if we see nothing impossible or incredible in the fact of a future life, if we believe in God not merely as a nexus of blind forces, but as an infinite love, a fatherly providence, maintaining the great order of things with a perfect wisdom, and guiding all to blessed ends; if we find in ourselves not only body, but soul, not only sensation, but thought, powers of inexhaustible affection, untiring aspiration, reason which beholds universal law, conscience which forever proclaims within us, with solemn voice, the law of absolute right, and a hope which has always looked forward to other worlds,—then we may believe in the reappearance of Jesus as the only sufficient explanation of the rising again of a fallen faith. The resurrection of Jesus was the resurrection of Christianity.

Man has been so made by the Creator that he believes naturally, almost necessarily, in the continued existence of the soul after death. This has been the universal faith of man in ancient and modern times, in all the great religions of the world, on all the four continents, and in the islands which sleep afar amid the waters of the blue Pacific. It has been the faith of savage and civilized man; and, if we believe man to be the child of God, then this faith has been planted in his deepest instincts by his heavenly Father. Then it is no delusion, but a prophecy of a coming reality.

But by the resurrection of Jesus this universal belief became a power, this dim expectation was changed into a living hope. A great event took place, which was the source of such confidence in immortal being that it changed the face of the world. What was this event? That the

Master who had been crucified reappeared to his friends, more heavenly, yet the same; not a vague apparition, not a shadowy ghost, but a distinct reality. He stood by their side and talked with them, comforted them, gave them instruction as to what to do; brought the heavenly world down to this earth; convinced them that only a thin veil separated this life from that which is to follow it. He fulfilled his own words: he himself was resurrection and life. He was there, standing among them, visibly risen, living in a higher life than theirs, but not far away. The heavenly world had come down close to this; the heavens were opened, and the disciples looked into them. They saw and knew that because they believed in this living and immortal friend they could not die. Death had no dominion over him, and would have none over them. Peter, only a little while before, doubting, timid, with no solid conviction, was now able to write to his fellow-disciples in these glowing words: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, according to his abundant mercy, has caused us to be born again into a living hope by the rising of Jesus from the dead." Paul, who does not mention any of the miracles performed by Jesus during his life, refers to the resurrection of Jesus at least thirty times in his Epistles. The resurrection of Jesus created a faith in the minds of the apostles which became the faith of the Church, and has been transmitted down to our times. Belief in a hereafter has become an instinct among Christians, a part of our Christian civilization. It has made prophets and martyrs, saints and heroes. It has been the support of the dying and the comfort of the bereaved. We do not merely believe in immortality, but we know it. It is a part of that inward experience which we call knowledge. It deepens with this Christian experience, and as we grow in faith and love, in trust and hope, as we pray more and realize more

the presence of God, we become more certain of the resurrection. This does not come to us by reasoning or argument, but by life. It is not a belief which can be proved by logic, but a sentiment which grows by living. "Our life is hid with Christ in God."

What, then, do we know? In what consists our knowledge of the hereafter? It consists, first, in the conviction expressed by Longfellow when he says,—

"There is no death; what seems so is transition."

As we think more of what is good, as we think of immortal truth and infinite love, as we live more in noble thoughts and purposes, death becomes more unreal. Great souls tend naturally to this faith: they have an intuition of immortality. In all times, minds like those of Plato, Socrates, Dante, Bacon, Shakspeare, Sir Thomas Browne, Herder, Goethe, Schiller, Emerson, Carlyle, Longfellow, have taken immortality for granted, as something which they could not doubt. And how many thousands and tens of thousands, not men of genius, but faithful disciples of Christ, good fathers and mothers, good sons and daughters, have eternal life abiding in them, which abolishes death, and wins the victory over the grave!

But we are always longing to know more. We say, "How are the dead raised up, and with what body do they come?" Here we know only in part, and see, as men saw their faces in the old bronze mirrors of those days, darkly. The apostles recognized their own ignorance, and frankly confessed it. "It doth not yet appear," says the apostle John, "what we shall be"; but "now," says he, "we are the sons of God," his children, and therefore he will do for us more than we can ask or think. It was the belief of Paul that "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy

to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." Such has been the living hope of the Christian world, that the next world will be an advance on this, higher, better, purer, nobler, happier. This hope is in accordance with all we know of God's laws here. This world is governed by the law of progress,—of progress from unorganized matter to living things; progress from lower animal forms to higher; progress from these to man; progress from the savage life of man to civilization and from a lower civilization to a higher. Such being the universal law here, we have reason to believe that God's other worlds will have the same law of progress, and that the destiny of man is to ascend higher and ever higher in the scale of being.

Thus far we have gone with some certainty. We know by our inward experience that we are the sons of God, therefore dear to our Father; therefore, having made us for himself, he will not let us die. We know that death is nothing, only change. We know that God is leading the universe upward and onward, and each great transition lifts us to a higher plane, where we shall see more of his wisdom, his goodness and power, where we shall have more to know, more to do, and more to love.

But now we pass on from the domain where we may have certain convictions and a sure faith, into the region of probability. Shall we recognize our friends hereafter? This is so highly probable as to be almost certain. If there is one undying element in the soul, it is love. If there is one power which binds together high and low, great and small, it is love. If Jesus, who loved the whole world, nevertheless loved his own immediate friends so much as to promise them that where he was they should be also, and that he was going away to prepare a place where they might be with him, we may believe in the permanence of all genuine love. Father Taylor, when dying, was told by some

friend, "Dear brother, you are going into the company of the angels." "What do I care for angels?" said the honest, straightforward saint: "I want to be with folks." That was genuine, sincere, and highly suggestive. I never knew a man who seemed to me to have his conversation in heaven more than Father Taylor; never one to whom eternal things were more living and actual realities. But his spiritual insight taught him that we need human love even in heaven, and he was sure that we should have it.

Paul takes a step farther in this land of probability. His firm conviction was that we shall not be disembodied spirits there, but, as here, souls living in organized forms, in bodies, in the bodies by which we come into relations with other souls and the whole mysterious creation. He teaches us that, at death, we lay down the animal body and rise in a spiritual body, but shall be still in a body, still living in an organized form; still in time and space, somewhere, not everywhere. He tells us that the future body will differ from the present in these particulars,—in being incorruptible, not liable to decay and change; in being more powerful, with larger faculties, capacities hitherto undeveloped, perhaps new senses and new powers; in being glorious, that is, with a more radiant beauty, a more divine expression, a more heavenly outward manifestation of the thought and love within; and, lastly, a spiritual body, one in which the spirit governs and controls the organization, and is not controlled by it; in which the lower nature is subject to the higher, and we not only will what is right, but also do right. These are the convictions of the apostle Paul in regard to the hereafter, and such was the depth of his spiritual insight that they carry with them a great weight of authority. They are also, I think, wholly in accordance with reason and with the text of Scripture. The spiritual body thus described by Paul is that which

was seen by the disciples and by Paul himself. It was the risen body of the Master, in one respect the same as his earthly body, because having the same principle of organization, but different, because more highly developed and unfolded. It was the ascended body,—“lovelier in heaven’s sweet climate, yet the same.”

“But why do we not know more?” we say. It is a blessing that we do not know more. Far better for us while we are here not to know too much of the hereafter. It would take our attention away from this life and from present duty. Why should we be thinking about the other world? Our duty is here; our daily work is enough to occupy our thought and time; to improve this world is a sufficient task. Many of our prayers and hymns teach a false morality and a false piety on this subject. One of our hymns says,—

“Fain would we leave this weary road,
And sleep in death, to be with God.”

That implies that God is not with us now; that we have no access to him here, which is unsound doctrine. The spirit of Christ does not teach us to despise this world and to long for another, but to give our heart and thought while we are here to making God’s kingdom come on earth. If we knew more of the other world and its greater joy and glory, we might lose our interest in this, and that would be a misfortune.

Knowledge is blessed when it is joined with our present duty and comes by a natural law. But ignorance may also be blessed. What a fortunate thing that we do not know the time of our death or that of those whom we love! If we did, it would paralyze life. But, being thus ignorant, we can work on cheerfully to the last moment because

“Death still draws nearer, never seeming near.”

So long as we are well and strong, we seem to have a few years of life before us, no matter how old we are. Therefore, we can cheerfully work on. But, if we knew that we were to die at a certain time, no matter though it were several years distant, we should not, I suppose, be able to engage so earnestly in our present work. Our ignorance on this subject, then, is a blessed ignorance.

So, too, our absolute ignorance concerning some problems which every thinking person is compelled to consider, has its advantages. No person who thinks at all, but at times tries to settle such questions as these: "How can God fore-know all that will happen, and yet man be free?" "How can all things which happen to us be determined by the divine Providence, and yet occur in accordance with universal law?" "How can evil exist in the universe, and yet God be all-powerful, all-wise, and all-good?" These are questions which we forever ask, problems we struggle earnestly to solve. There is no answer now, no solution. We come to a solid wall which we cannot pass. Yet we know that to every question which the human reason is compelled to ask there must be somewhere an answer. If the answer is not here, it is in some other world. There are highways of thought, all converging toward some world of knowledge beyond. There are prophecies of a hereafter rooted in the very instincts of the reason. We are children in a lower class, at work on arithmetic, who have come to problems which can only be solved when we pass up into another room and study the higher mathematics.

No doubt there are also insoluble mysteries connected with the resurrection of Jesus. If, as was formerly believed, he rose in his earthly body, it was merely coming to life again. Then he would have to die once more. But "Christ, being raised from the dead, dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him." If he rose in his earthly

body, if he only came back to this life again, his resurrection was not going up into a higher world, it was not a revelation of future existence, it does not show us the reality of the other life. Its great power is gone, its chief value is taken away. I therefore am satisfied that Christ arose in his higher form, and was seen by his friends in his risen, heavenly body. But there are difficulties here, too. What became of the earthly body? How was it possible to eat and drink with his friends, as is reported? This, therefore, must remain an insoluble problem for us at the present time. But suppose we understood it, and that everything concerning the resurrection was made perfectly plain and simple. Suppose we had a scientific explanation of the nature of death and the passage upward into another state. Suppose all the mystery were gone. Would not something of the interest be gone, too? Is it not best that some questions asked here should remain unanswered?

Paul argues (Rom. viii. 24-25) that hope is sometimes better than knowledge. He says: "We are saved by hope. But hope that is seen is not hope; for what a man seeth why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it." That is to say that, if we knew all about the other life, and saw everything there as distinctly as we see things around us, we should lose both the benefit of expectation, of looking forward to something new, and the discipline of patience, the patience that awaits, and contents itself with the present while expecting the future.

You are expecting the arrival of a friend. You watch the hours till he comes. There is a joyful hope in your heart. He arrives; that peculiar excitement then goes, and gives place to a calm content. Both are good, and it is well to have something to look forward to, something to hope for.

Blessed be the knowledge God has given us, and blessed be the ignorance in which he has left us. We know this,—that we are his children. We know this also,—that there is another life for us. What that life is we do not know. But we can implicitly trust the Infinite Goodness, we can entirely rely on the divine care. It is a pleasure sometimes to put our hand into the hand of a friend wiser and better than ourselves, and be led. Better sometimes to lean on love than to lean on science. Better to be in some things like the little child described in Tennyson, walking with her father and mother, and feeling perfectly safe, though not knowing where she is going:—

“And in their double love secure,
The little maiden walked demure,
Pacing with downward eyelids pure.”

And then the poet describes how this sweet unity of father, mother, and child, seemed to explain the mystery of being which had baffled his intellect. “‘The dull and bitter voice’ of doubt and perplexity was silenced. Another voice of trust and hope whispered to his heart, ‘Be of good cheer.’ It was ‘a little hint to solace woe’; a murmur out of a blissful neighborhood, ‘I see the end. I know the good’; music like that of an Æolian harp, which gives no determined tune, but suggests some melody above our comprehension.

“Such seemed the whisper at my side;
‘What is it thou know’st, sweet voice?’ I cried.
‘A hidden hope,’ the voice replied.

“Which shows, although no tongue can prove,
That every cloud which spreads above,
And veileth love, itself is love.”

